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TAGS: PREL ZL BK AL BU TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: ERDOGAN'S BALKAN TOUR HEAVY ON GOOD WILL,  
LIGHT ON SUBSTANCE

REF: TIRANA 254

Classified By: PolCouns Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: PM Erdogan's March 24-28 regional trip to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Albania, and Bulgaria was "successful, but light on substance." It came at a time when Turkey wants to demonstrate what it can to enhance stability in the Balkans, and signaled as well to the Turkish public that the PM (embattled at home with an ongoing closure case against his political party) is trying to tend to business as usual. End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (C) MFA Deputy Director General for Central and Southeastern Europe Hasan Asan told us April 1 that most of the meetings focused on bilateral economic relations, reflected by the large delegation of Turkish businessmen accompanying Erdogan. The trip's timing was more a function of an opening in the Prime Minister's schedule than a specific agenda; Erdogan had to cancel his last two planned trips to Albania. Overall, he characterized the trip as successful, if light on substance. Asan noted that both the GOA and GOBiH expressed interest in becoming transit countries for the TGI (Turkey-Greece-Italy) pipeline project.

¶3. (C) Asan reported Erdogan had harbored apprehensions about meeting Bosnian PM Spiric for the first time, but found his tete-a-tete with the Bosnian Serb to be "fruitful." The Prime Ministers reportedly discussed "all aspects of the bilateral relationship." As in his meetings with other Bosnian leaders, Erdogan emphasized the importance of maintaining Bosnia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. During his joint talk with the Tri-Presidency members, Erdogan encouraged the three ethnic groups to find a compromise on police reform in order to "open the door" to a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU.

¶4. (C) On the margins of the meeting, Asan noted Erdogan pushed Bosniak Presidency Member Silajdzic to work with Bosniak opposition Democratic Action Party (SDA) leader Tihic so as not to give the public impression that the Bosnian Muslims were divided, emphasizing that "if everyone works together, the SAA will come." During his private session with Tihic, who had flown back from Ljubljana where he was receiving cancer treatment, Erdogan delivered the same message. BiH officials highlighted the disproportionate trade balance between the two nations. Asan remarked that

the appropriate GOT ministries are investigating the possibility of purchasing additional Bosnian raw materials or minerals "for the sake of the bilateral relationship."

¶ 15. (C) MFA Balkans Department Head Ilhan Saygili told us PM Erdogan received a warm reception in Tirana, adding Turkey's relations with Albania are "perfect." Saygili reported Erdogan's March 25-26 meetings with Albanian PM Berisha, President Topi, Speaker Topalli, and opposition leader Rama focused primarily on the economic aspects of the bilateral relationship (reftel). Saygili added Erdogan and Berisha discussed Kosovo in-depth during their one-on-one. Erdogan highlighted Turkey's support for Kosovo in their subsequent joint press conference. While in Albania, Erdogan also opened a Turkish-owned hospital center and launched majority Turkish-owned Eagle Mobile, Albania's third GSM provider.

¶ 16. (C) After providing glowing reports on the BiH and Albanian trips, Asan described Erdogan's March 27-28 visit to Bulgaria as "OK." As in Albania, Erdogan's meetings with President Paravanov, PM Stanishev, and Speaker Pirinski covered economic issues and were not highly political. Erdogan paid no attention to the nationalist Agrarian Party's protests. In addition, Erdogan met with Turkish-minority party leader Dogan and visited ethnic Turkish communities in Kardzhali and Targovishte, where he opened a new Sisecan glass factory.

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